

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Roy Tricker, The Fun and Fascination of Old Churches

Roy Tricker gave an entertaining presentation to the May meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about his passion for visiting old churches.

There are about 500 medieval churches in Suffolk and many more in the rest of East Anglia. They were built to inspire and many enjoy beautiful settings like the church at Cavendish which has thatched cottages adjacent to it. This is a reminder to look at the outside of a church and its site, as well as the interior.

Churches are often the oldest buildings in a village and most are still used for their original purpose, unlike many other village buildings which have been used in different ways at different times. They are all unique in design, and many have evolved and changed over time. Rumburgh Church, near Bungay, was built in the 12th Century. It is unusual as it has a square tower which was never finished. However, features like this give churches their distinctive character. The church at Earl Stonham is an example of a building which is a work of art. The nave was built in the 1300s and the level of the roof was raised by adding a clear storey a century later. The new roof has single hammer beams and which give it the appearance of an upturned ship. The church illustrates the amazing skills of carpentry, design and engineering possessed by medieval craftsmen. There are also intricate carvings on the choir stalls which survived the English Civil War and the attempts of Puritans to destroy excessive decoration in churches.

Some old churches are found in the most unlikely locations. One of the oldest wooden churches in Europe is along a narrow lane, by a farm, in a small Essex village at Greensted Juxta Ongar. Its walls are made from half oak trees and date from about 1000CE.

Bramfield Church has a detached tower which dates from the 12th Century but the rest of the church was built in a later period. The church has a screen separating the chancel from the nave which dates from the 1470s. At its base there are three pieces of art depicting the four evangelists and Mary Magdalene. They give an insight into the life and appearance of medieval people by showing their clothes, their hair and how they looked. The font at Baddingham Church provides similar evidence. It was made about 1480 and is engraved with the seven sacraments. One illustrates the anointing of a dying man, Extreme Unction, and it has many fascinating features. The sick man is lying in bed wearing a night gown and a cap. Under the bed is a chamber pot and the man's shoes. The priest administering the sacrament has a tonsure as the top of his head is shaved. His wife is kneeling tearfully next to bed. Images like this would have been important for teaching the faith to a largely illiterate congregation. Similarly, a screen with a 15th Century painting shows the Christian concept of Judgement Day with the separation of the righteous and the damned. It had been painted over and was discovered by chance at Wenhaston Church. It is on display there.

Churches were built by hand and even features which are barely visible from the ground have been carved with great care and devotion because the church is God's house. However, there are occasional examples of the sense of humour of the stonemasons. At Glington Church, Cambridgeshire, most of the gargoyles have the mouths but the final one is a posterior which spouts water! Possibly the mason did not think that he had been paid correctly.

Roy Tricker concluded his talk with the warning that visiting old churches can become very addictive.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 26 June when Robert BurrIDGE will give a talk entitled *Scott, Amundsen and the Race to the Pole*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

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